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NEA/ARPI FOR SHUKAN, S/WE FOR SASHA MAHRA, NEA/MEPI FOR
JAMES BEAN, NEA/FO FOR ERIN WALSH.

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/19/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SA](#) [KISL](#)
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF LABOR TELLS RELIGIOUS POLICE ONLY MOL
CAN CONTROL FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The religious police, or Mutawwa denied that it was responsible for the recent firing of 69 saleswomen at cosmetic and lingerie department stores in Jeddah. The Mutawwa ordered the stores closed after accusing the saleswomen of mingling with men, and criticized them for not covering completely and for wearing make-up. During a meeting with the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), Labor Minister al-Qussaibi declared that only the Ministry of Labor controls employment policy, and promised to investigate the matter further. Meanwhile, public sentiment is opposed to the recently increasing presence of the Mutawwa in Jeddah. A local women's professional association initiated a boycott of lingerie shops staffed by men. END SUMMARY.

JEDDAH WITNESSES INCREASED MUTAWWA PRESENCE:

¶2. (C) On July 17 PolOff met with several Jeddawis who told PolOff that for the last several years the presence of the religious police in Jeddah was low key at best. Over the past month, however, they have witnessed a resurgence of the Mutawwa activities, including increased patrols in shopping malls to thwart young men and women from mingling in public. They also said that many restaurants have installed walled partitions between the family and singles sections, which previously was nonexistent. Restaurant managers reportedly claim that it is the customers from outside Jeddah requesting such divisions. Some Jeddawis feel that the Mutawwa's increased activities are a sign that conservative elements are reasserting their influence in Jeddah, which has normally been considered a more liberal city. Others expressed hope that this resurgence of conservatism will last only through the summer months while the SAG is operating out of Jeddah.

MUTAWWA PRESSURES SHOPS TO FIRE SALESWOMEN:

¶3. (C) Gazzazz cosmetics stores in Jeddah recently employed 69 saleswomen following the Ministry of Labor's issuance of Resolution 120 in June, which authorized women to work in women's apparel stores. Responding to complaints received from two former disgruntled women employees, the Mutawwa conducted a surprise visit and accused the saleswomen of mingling with men, although they work in an area open to both women and men shoppers. The Mutawwa also criticized the saleswomen for not covering completely and for wearing make-up, charges which the saleswomen denied. News reports state that the Mutawwa ordered the stores closed within three days. According to media reports, the owner refused, but

later was allegedly pressured to fire the women after the Mutawwa threatened to remove the women forcibly if the stores did not comply. Writers for the Islamist website al-Sahat issued statements July 18 supporting the termination of the women, and lauded their firings as a big blow to Labor Minister Ghazy al-Qussaibi.

SAG RESPONSE TO THE FIRING OF 69 WOMEN:

¶4. (U) While attending a meeting with the newly-appointed Chairman Saleh Turki of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce (JCCI), al-Qussaii commented on the firings stating that "there i no power other than the Ministry of Labor responsible for the employment of women in the Kingdom" and that the Ministry would thoroughly investigate and issue a statement soon.

¶5. (U) According to media reports, the JCCI stated that it planned to provide assistance to the fired saleswomen. In an interview, JCCI board member Mrs. Nashwa Taher said that she will work closely with the Khadija Bint Khwailed Women's Center (KBK) on behalf of these working women.

WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION REACTS BY ORGANIZING BOYCOTT:

¶6. (C) Representatives from the newly-established, MEPI-sponsored Saudi Business and Professional Women's Association (SBAPW) told ConGenOffs that it initiated a Kingdom-wide boycott of all lingerie shops staffed by men. They advertised the boycott via email and text messages in both English and Arabic, and encouraged women to protest the

indefinite postponement of Resolution 120, by boycotting businesses where they cannot shop "freely, comfortably and with dignity." The text of the announcement also stated in part, "We need your help! Only you can make a difference. The pressure to implement women employment comes from you and only you."

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The Labor Minister's comments challenging the Mutawwa are significant given the role the Mutawwa play in Saudi society. In the past, al-Qussaibi has clashed with conservatives, who consider him too liberal. The more conservative mood observed in Jeddah suggests that there is a continued resistance to the King's reform agenda, particularly pertaining to women's rights. However, the activities of the women's association are a promising sign that a nascent civil society is emerging. END COMMENT.
Gfoeller